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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine the effects of early field experience on the attitudes of elementary preservice teachers toward the career of teaching and the teaching environment of the elementary school. Participants in the study were 95 elementary teacher education students enrolled in an internship program at the University of South Florida in which they were assigned to observe/assist in elementary school classrooms two mornings a week for 11 weeks, supervised by their university professors. They also met in a once-a-week seminar conducted by their assigned professor. Pretest and postest data were collected by means of an instrument using the semantic differential. Included were items on their desire to pursue a teaching career, their ability to teach, their familiarity with present-day schools, and their preference to teach in either lower elementary or higher elementary levels. Findings revealed a slight decrease in desire to pursue a career as an elementary teacher. However, it was concluded that the attitudes of elementary preservice teachers toward the career of teaching and the environment of teaching was strongly positive. It was also concluded that the students' awareness of the school environment neither positively nor negatively affected their attitudes toward the concepts of teaching and elementary schools. (JD)

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Effects of Early Field Experience on the Attitudes of Elementary Preservice Teachers

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Running Head: EFFECTS OF EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCE

SP 028 602

Effects of Early Field Experience on the Attitudes of Elementary Preservice Teachers

For a number of decades, the standard method of training teachers for the classroom was to rely almost exclusively on university course work and a few weeks of student teaching at the end of the teacher preparation program. "The study of education tended to be overly academic and student teaching was too short and too unpredictable to carry the burden of practical training" (Ryan & Cooper, 1980, p. 134). Wagner (1965) indicated a need for additional field experience by stating, "It is as irrational to rely on the student teaching period to give education students the true picture as it would be to postpone a medical student's first encounter with surgery until he interns" (p. 67).

When student teaching was the first opportunity in the preparation program for the prospective teacher to teach and work directly with children in an elementary school setting, it was possible for a student to progress to the last semester of the program before discovering that he or she was not well suited to this profession or did not like to teach. Early field experience (that is, systematic in-school experiences prior to student teaching) allows the person to make a conscious effort to acquire skills that enable him or her to cope with classroom realities or, perhaps, to even choose another career.

Today, many universities have improved their teacher education programs by providing their teacher candidates with early, directed field

experiences in the schools. In these programs, candidates are required to spend time in schools, sometimes as observers and sometimes in more active helping roles. In many programs they perform tasks that contribute directly to the learning of children.

These early field experiences introduce prospective teachers to the various tasks and skills involved in the teaching-learning process as found in the actual classroom. It is believed that the classroom teacher will demonstrate to the prospective teacher the application of theory that has been introduced in the methods and foundation courses, thereby helping the prospective teacher to discover relevance and usefulness for this theory. This should serve to bridge the gap between what is taught at the university and the real life situation in the school classroom.

Early field experience also has the potential for affecting teacher candidates' attitudes toward teaching and the teaching environment. A study by Page (1983) found that when perceptions of teaching of preservice teachers differed markedly from the perceptions of teaching of inservice teachers, the preservice teachers were almost always the more optimistic group. Interactions with school realities may reduce teacher candidates' sometimes unrealistic ideas.

Early field experience can be an opportunity to correct misinterpretations and bias held about the career and develop more realistic attitudes and expectations about the processes of schooling and teaching. These more realistic attitudes can allow prospective teachers to evaluate their choice of teaching as a vocation. By providing the

opportunity for self assessment, teacher candidates can know rather quickly if this is what they want to do with their lives, and there may be fewer who, upon completing student teaching, find they have chosen the wrong profession.

Review of Literature

In a study by Austin-Martin, Bull, and Molrine (1981) the interpersonal skills of prospective teachers were affected by early field experiences. There was significant positive improvement in those areas which affect teaching success as measured by the Minnesota Teacher Attitude Scale.

In a study by Clark (1974), interviews with prospective teachers determined that 11 out of 153 (7%) had decided to withdraw from the teacher preparation program as a result of an early field experience. The experience had helped them to assess, at an earlier point in their program, their choice of education as a profession.

Few field experiences tend to have positive effects on preservice teachers according to Malone (1984) in his meta-analysis of duration studies of field experiences.

Henry (1983) determined that an increased number of required field experiences had little impact on student teachers' evaluations of their teaching ability.

Wasicsko and others (1981) found that field-based university students became less positive in their attitudes towards schools and schooling while the attitudes of the campus-based (control) group

remained the same or became more positive.

A study by Weaver, Hounshell, and Coble (1979), determined that university students enrolled in a science methods course with or without field experiences exhibited similar attitudes toward science and science teaching. A field experience did not enhance their attitudes toward science nor did it appear to be detrimental to their attitudes toward science and science teaching. This finding was corroborated in a study by Harty (1984) in which he also found no significant differences between the attitudes towards science teaching of students in campus-based and field based teacher preparation programs.

Clearly, the results from the literature are equivocal. It was the purpose of the present study to determine the effects of early field experience on the attitudes of elementary preservice teachers toward the career of teaching and the teaching environment (the elementary school).

Method

The participants of this study were 95 elementary teacher education students enrolled at the University of South Florida during the spring semester of 1986. These students were enrolled in the Level I Internship, in which they were assigned to observe/assist in public school elementary classrooms two mornings a week for 11 weeks (a total of 66 hours). Students were assigned to one of four schools in the Hillsborough County (Tampa) School District, and they were supervised by one of three university professors. In addition, students met once a week at the

university for a fifty-minute seminar conducted by their assigned university professor.

Of the 95 students, 96% were female, and the majority (76%) listed junior as their classification. Ages ranged from 19 to 47 with the mean age being 23 years (mode = 20). In addition, the majority (59%) of the students had never worked in a volunteer or paid capacity in a school. The majority (63%) had no prior field experience as part of a college course, nor did the majority (86%) have children enrolled in school.

Pretest and posttest data were collected by means of an instrument using the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). The semantic differential was chosen for data collection because it "is a fairly sensitive measure of attitude change" (Kerlinger, 1973, p. 580). Using ten evaluative scales of bipolar adjective pairs, the instrument measured the participants' attitudes toward the concepts of (1) Elementary School and (2) Teaching, both before and after the field experience. Also included on the instrument were items using a Likert-type scale that measured the participants' perception of (1) their degree of desire to pursue a career as an elementary teacher, (2) their ability to teach, (3) their familiarity with present-day schools, (4) their preference to teach in lower elementary (K-3) rather than in upper elementary (4-6), and (5) their preference to teach in upper elementary rather than in lower. (See Figure.)

Results and Conclusions

Data collected from the pretest and posttest of the participants' attitudes toward the concepts of (1) Elementary School and (2) Teaching were subjected to statistical analysis. The ten evaluative scales were each scored from 1 (negative) to 7 (positive). When summed, the ten scales had a possible low score of 10 and a possible high score of 70; the midpoint was 40. For the concept Elementary School, the mean score was 60.11 on the pretest. After the field experience, the mean score on this concept was 61.30, resulting in a average gain per participant of 1.19, which was not statistically significant when subjected to a *t*-test for matched pairs. For the concept Teaching, the mean score for the pretest was 63.09 and the mean score for the posttest was 63.10, resulting in an average loss per participant of 0.01 points, which was also not statistically significant.

Significance was achieved when the posttest scores for the two concepts were compared using *t*-test for matched pairs, $t(93) = -2.89$, $p < .01$. The students' posttest score on the concept of Teaching was significantly more positive than the posttest score on the concept of Elementary School.

The five items using the Likert-type scale measuring the participants' perceptions were each scored from a 1 (strongly disagree) to a 5 (strongly agree). Statistical analysis was determined separately for each item. The results were as follow:

1. There was a slight, though not significant, decrease in the participants' perceived desire to pursue a career as an elementary teacher.

2. There was a slight increase in the participants' perceived ability to teach, though this increase was not found to be significant.

3. The participants' perceived familiarity with present-day schools was significantly higher on the posttest, $t(92) = -3.85$, $p < .01$.

4. There was an increase in the participants'' perceived preference to teach in lower elementary and an decrease in the participants' perceived preference to teach in upper elementary, though significance was not achieved.

It was concluded that the attitudes of elementary preservice teachers toward the career of teaching and the environment of teaching is strongly positive. Not a single student's posttest score on the concepts of Teaching and Elementary School fell below the midpoint of 40, and the means for both measures of both concepts did not fall below 60 (with a possible high score of 70).

It was also concluded that, although elementary teacher education students became significantly more aware of present-day schools after an early field experience, this awareness neither positively nor negatively affected their attitudes toward the concepts of Teaching and Elementary School. This finding is in agreement with that of Weaver, Hounshell, and Coble (1979) and Harty (1984), though it refutes the findings of Wassicsko et al. (1981). Eight students withdrew from the internship

before the posttest data was collected, possibly because they had changed their minds about pursuing a teaching career. Had data from these students been included in the study, it is possible that the mean for the attitude scale could have been less positive.

One can only speculate why students' attitudes towards the career of teaching is more positive than attitudes towards the environment of teaching (the elementary school). It is possible that the students' perceived a low locus of control over the environment, as the environment was controlled by the administrators and supervising teachers in the school. A higher locus of control over their own teaching performance may have resulted in the difference in attitudes, and the "missionary spirit," or believing that when they are the classroom teachers, they can do a better job, could also account for this difference in attitudes.

Clearly, additional research needs to be conducted to determine whether early field experience programs are achieving the goal of providing a realistic base for teacher education students to make decisions about their futures as educators.

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FIGURE

TEACHING

1.	pleasant	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	unpleasant
2.	ugly	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	beautiful
3.	good	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	bad
4.	clean	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	dirty
5.	awful	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	nice
6.	successful	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	unsuccessful
7.	worthless	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	valuable
8.	important	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	unimportant
9.	bright	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	dark
10.	dishonest	_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____	honest

Instructions: Please respond to each of the following items according to the following scale: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, U = Undecided, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

1.	I want to pursue a career as an elementary teacher.	SA	A	U	D	SD
2.	I have the ability to teach.	SA	A	U	D	SD
3.	I am familiar with present-day schools.. . . .	SA	A	U	D	SD
4.	I would prefer to teach in lower elementary (K-3) rather than in upper elementary (4-6).	SA	A	U	D	SD
5.	I would prefer to teach in upper elementary (4-6) rather than in lower elementary (K-3).	SA	A	U	D	SD

END

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